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ABSTRACT

Children of families in the Showmen's Guild of Australasia have traveled throughout Australia for generations as their families followed show circuits. Educational provision for these children has varied enormously in the past. In 1992, the Queensland Department of Education assigned three teachers at the School of Distance Education (Brisbane) to meet the needs of this group through use of existing distance education materials and newly developed, individualized strategies and materials. The program also supplied teachers in 18 schools attended by show children during show weeks. Interviews with parents and students sought to develop an understanding of practices and issues in the provision of education to this educationally disadvantaged group; to determine the degree of family satisfaction with present provisions; and to assess the potential of such programs for other groups of itinerant students. Data collected included children's mobility patterns, educational histories, achievement and ability levels, educational and occupational aspirations, factors affecting educational progress, perceived needs, and desired improvements to the current program. Findings reveal the social structure, expectations, and values of Showmen's Guild members and how these factors influence the provision of education to their children. Research problems related to sampling, interviewing techniques, and ethical considerations are discussed. (LP)

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PRACTICES AND ISSUES IN THE EDUCATION OF ITINERANT STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE SHOWMEN'S GUILD CHILDREN

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PRACTICES AND ISSUES IN THE EDUCATION OF ITINERANT STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE SHOWMEN'S GUILD CHILDREN

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This paper reports initial research into issues relating to the education of itinerant students who are classified as an educationally disadvantaged group with "special needs" in the national *Schooling in Rural Australia* report (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988). It is current research that is being undertaken in conjunction with teachers from the School of Distance Education, Brisbane, and members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. The purpose of the research is to develop an understanding of former and current practices and issues in the provision of education to this group; to determine the degree of satisfaction the families have with present provisions; and to assess the potential of such programs with other groups of itinerant students. The paper reports on initial impressions and programmatic issues and dilemmas arising from the qualitative research design process.

RC 019260

INTRODUCTION

Much current educational research (eg., Birch & Lally, 1992) is concerned with the special needs of various minorities, sometimes called "disadvantaged groups". One such group is the children of members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. This paper reports on initial research being conducted into an educational package specially designed for these children by the Queensland Department of Education.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

- Little research has been conducted into the education of itinerant students, as a group they have been classified as educationally disadvantaged (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988, p.111f).

- Children of families from the Showmen's Guild are a distinct sub-group of itinerant students with particular characteristics and needs.

- A program for Showmen's Guild children, recently established by the Queensland Department of Education, has provided a research opportunity to gain insights into the particular educational contexts and needs of show children.

- Greater knowledge and understanding of the nature of educational provision for a particular group of itinerant students could lead to the development of more effective educational programs for other groups of itinerant students.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

- To establish, with respect to a sample of itinerant Showmen's Guild children, case histories presenting:

  - mobility patterns;
  - educational histories;
  - achievement and ability levels;
  - educational and occupational aspirations;
  - factors affecting educational progress;
  - perceived needs;
  - desired improvements to the current program.

- To obtain information about past and present educational support for Showmen's Guild children as it applies to:
  - support services;
  - curriculum materials;
  - perceived outcomes and areas of need.

- To identify principles and procedures within the program for the Showmen's Guild children that could be applied to the education of children in other itinerant groups.

- To ascertain the potential to extend the program for the Showmen's Guild children to other itinerant students.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

- Children of families in the Showmen's Guild have travelled throughout Australia for generations as their families followed show circuits. Educational provision for these children has varied enormously in format in the past. This has included children moving from school to school, atttending boarding school, and enrolling in correspondence courses.

- After strong petitioning from Queensland-based families of the Showmen's Guild, the Queensland Department of Education, in 1989, assigned two teachers at the School of Distance Education, Brisbane, to meet the particular needs of this grouip. The initiative aimed to provide a continuous and consistent program for the children utilising both

existing distance education materials and newly developed, individualised strategies and materials. In 1992 there are three teachers assigned to the program.

- The Queensland program involves the employment of supply teachers in the eighteen schools attended by the show children during show weeks. These teachers supervise the children as they work on their distance education materials. At times, the teachers from Brisbane are able to travel to some schools to meet and work with the show children and their families. The Showmen's Guild children continue to work on their Brisbane distance education materials while they are interstate.

- Parents from the Showmen's Guild are currently in contact with the Departments of Education in New South Wales and Victoria, with a view to having similar teachers placed in schools accommodating their children.

RELATED LITERATURE

The education of Showmen's Guild children is unique in Australia, due to the fact that a model of distance education learning is being offered to a group of children who change school and town almost weekly. The following review selects areas of the theory of distance learning and home schooling, as these affect itinerant students. Distance learning, as defined by Holmberg (1989), "covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or at the same premises but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and teaching of a supporting organisation" (p.3). As implied in this definition, the main research emphasis of much of the literature of distance learning is tertiary learning, not primary or secondary learning. However, the key concepts of the lack of continuous, immediate supervision apply to the research group in this study. Sewart, Keegan and Holmberg (1983) discuss the multi-media approach which distinguishes distance learning from correspondence learning. This multi-media approach is an integral feature of the program being studied here.

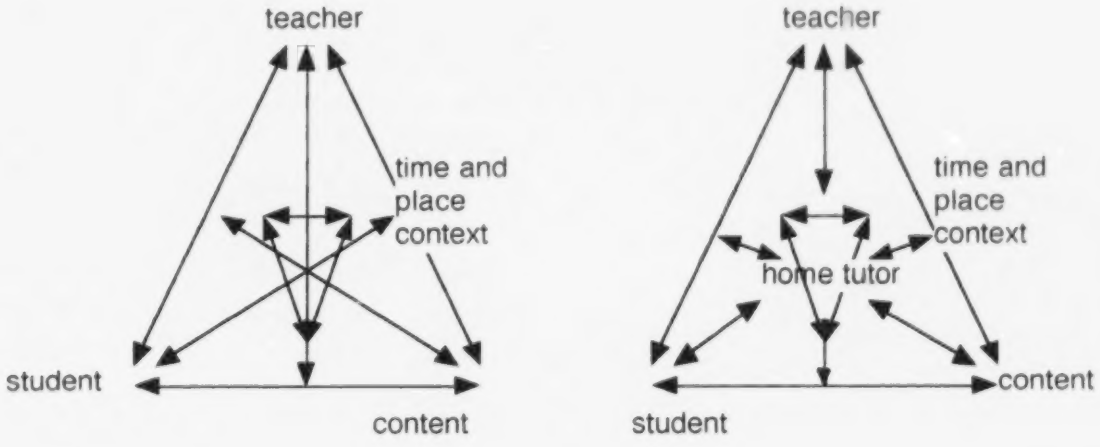
According to Holmberg (1989), certain hypotheses may be generated from the study of distance learning. The hypotheses from his study that apply to primary and secondary distance learning are:

- intrinsic motivation is a crucial condition for learning;

- learning is promoted by the student fitting subject matter into existing cognitive structures;
- warmth in human relationships, bearing on the study situation, is conducive to emotional development;
- feelings of rapport with tutors, counsellors, and the supporting organisation generally strengthen and support study motivation as well as promote study pleasure;
- learning is encouraged by frequent communication with fellow humans interested in the study (p. 162).

These hypotheses, while important factors to the present study, are influenced by an external element - the supply teacher and/or the home tutor. Their role would seem to be crucial to the success of the distance learning program.

Tomlinson, Coulter & Peacock (1986), in a study of home schooling in Western Australia, took the triadic and dynamic model of teaching that was developed by Hyman (1974) and added the home tutor:



Source: Tomlinson, D. et al. (1986). Teaching and learning at home: Distance education and the isolated child. Nedlands,WA: National Centre for Research on Rural Education, p.62f.

Tomlinson et al. confirm that in the distance learning mode teacher, pupil and content continue as essential elements of the teaching process although the

teacher operates from a distance. They further noted that the distance issue was compounded by factors such as the time lag between submission and return of the pupil's work (p.63). They found that the students identified strongly with the teacher but it was the home tutor who provided the link between the content, student and teacher. In the present study it would seem to be the supply teacher at the school and/or a home tutor in some instances who has the responsibility of providing that link.

Clark (1990) refers to a study by Higgins (1985), who defined isolation by geography, ethnicity, culture, language, social, economic, professional and exceptionality. Clark (1990) suggests that remoteness is a problem unique to the provision of education in rural areas. Clark's notion of isolation through geographic remoteness blends with Higgins' concept of isolation through culture and profession for the Showmen's Guild children, coupled with a further factor not explored by either writer, that of constant itinerancy. It is this combination of a variety of specific factors that leads to the*Weltanschauung* of the Showmen's Guild children.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The methodology of the study is discussed in relation to three substantive areas:

Sampling
Interviewing techniques
Ethical considerations

Sampling

In 1992 the basis of sampling was determined by practicalities such as which students were present at school when the interviews took place. All students were attending pre-school and primary school at the time of interview. Next year, the researchers intend to broaden the sample size and composition in order to take into account:

- Age and socio-economic and educational backgrounds of parents.

- Variety of show circuits.

- Secondary aged children (eg., children attending boarding schools or children who have left school and are in employment other than that connected with shows).

- Other groups connected with the show circuit (such as "itinerants" [people who sell food and other items at different shows] and "workers" [people who perform tasks like setting up stalls at different shows]).

Interviewing techniques

- The aim of the study was to record a wide range of data by means of applying a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule.

- The researchers decided to make the interview schedule widely rather than narrowly focussed. This was done in order not to exclude at the outset potentially useful data.

- During interviewing a variety of approaches by researchers were in evidence. These approaches ranged from asking questions in the order printed on the interview schedule, and writing detailed notes to record interviewees' responses, to basing subsequent questions on interviewees' responses, and interacting with interviewees rather than writing notes as they spoke.

- Differences in the researchers' interviewing styles might influence reporting of the data contained in the interviews.

Ethical considerations

- Difficulties in locating adults for signing of children's consent forms could mean some important data are not gathered. At what age are children capable of giving their "informed consent" for such studies?

- A tension between following the letter of ethical procedures and keeping the interviewees interested and "on side" (so that they would not refuse to be interviewed because the researchers spent too much time asking them to fill in forms).

- The need to respect the interviewees' right to privacy, and their right to withold personal information.

- A possible need to distil the findings of the study according to the intended audiences of particular reports of those findings.

- The relationship between the research group and the Showmen's Guild has possible ethical implications (the researchers cannot conduct the study without the Guild's co-operation; while the Guild could use the research findings to lobby for the continuation or extension of the educational program in which their children are involved).

TENTATIVE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Tentative findings of the initial research are presented. It is stressed that these findings are based on anecdotal evidence as systematic analysis of the data has not been completed. However, these findings might form the basis of hypotheses to be tested against the interview data when they have been transcribed and analysed.

- Showmen's Guild members are a distinct group within the show structure; there is a strict hierarchy differentiating showmen from itinerants and workers. Membership is by invitation/birthright.

- The Guild's educational concerns are directed only to issues related to this sub-group:

  - the Guild's concerns focus on its members' children, not all show children;
  - little contact appears to occur between itinerant or worker families and Showmen's Guild families;
  - encouragement for children of itinerant and worker families to participate in the Queensland Department of Education program for the Showmen's Guild children was not evident;
  - host schools are used as sites and resource centres for the program for the Showmen's Guild children - the social environment of each host school appears to be less important.

- There is a general expectation among parents and children that the children will continue on the show circuit as showmen.

- The study prompts the question: "What do the Guild parents want from their children's education?".

  - It appears that education isn't regarded as important pre-vocationally. (The children seem already to have a number of skills required to manage the family businesses.)
  - Education isn't seen as important in terms of personal development, beyond a narrow conception of education (eg. being literate and numerate).
  - Life for the showmen is highly structured and organised. Perhaps the parents seek a similar routine for their children's education - the provision of a school, relief teachers, resources to maintain their children's schooling.

- Interview data contain scant reference to the content of the program for the Showmen's Guild children. As suggested above, the program may be more important organisationally than educationally. Perhaps, once the program is well established, the children and parents may focus more on the curriculum *per se*.

- Within the Showmen's Guild, education of the children seems to be the domain of women.

- The Guild seems to provide a closely knit social network to which individuals are drawn when they encounter difficulties in the "outside world".

- Change in educational provision, has been generated by the actions of an active lobby group.

- The Showmen's Guild families appear to have a very well defined view of what they expect from the program for their children, which is based on their own perceptions and life experiences.

Considerations and Limitations

- **The data may potentially be skewed in favour of the attitudes and values of members of the Showmen's Guild currently involved with the show circuit.**

- **Potential problems with corroborating statements and assessing the representativeness of perceptions in the study.**

- **The lack of time for the researchers to build trust with the preschool children involved in the interviews make the validity of those interviews questionable. Interviewing such young children is often problematic.**

- **Difficulties might emerge when the researchers try to correlate the results of interviews conducted with adults, upper primary school children, and pre school children.**

- **Mobility of families, the short duration of stays at each location, and the parent involvement in show activities by necessity dictate a short time frame for data collection. This results in rushed interviews, large research teams and attendant difficulties associated with these factors.**

- **Next year the study will widen to assume a longitudinal facet and to take account of more than one show and more than one circuit.**

CONCLUSION

The researchers view this initial project as a valuable pilot study. Through this study, they have gained important information about the educational program provided through the Queensland Department of Education, and have developed important insights into the structure, practices and values of the Showmen's Guild. This experience and information will be invaluable in the planning and execution of the larger study to be conducted next year, when broadly conceived hypotheses are likely to be given a sharper focus through findings from this current study.

The researchers would welcome feedback on the content of this paper from other academics working in similar or related fields of investigation. Inquiries and/or information should be addressed to:

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